



**United States Department of Agriculture**  
Forest Service

**Proposed Action**

**for the**

**North 40 Scrub Management Project**

**National Forests in Florida, Ocala National Forest**

**February 2016**

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**Background and need for action**

The Ocala National Forest consists of approximately 360,000 acres of federally managed land in north-central peninsular Florida. Almost two-thirds of the forest (approximately 230,000 acres) is classified as scrub habitat, and the Ocala contains the largest contiguous area of scrub in the state. Most of the scrub (~90%) is classified as sand pine scrub that is characterized by an overstory of that species, whereas the remaining area is classified as oak scrub that lacks a closed canopy of trees.

Scrub habitats on the Ocala National Forest are recognized in the National Forests in Florida Land and Resource Management Plan (i.e., the Forest Plan; USDA 1999) as both a valuable timber resource and as a unique system inhabited by many rare species. The following Forest Plan goals and objectives (USDA 1999, p. 2.3-2.6) are related to scrub habitats and management:

Goal 5. Contribute to the social and economic well-being of local communities by promoting sustainable use of renewable natural resources and participating in efforts to devise creative solutions for economic health.

Goal 6. Maintain or, where necessary, restore ecosystem composition, structure, and function within the natural range of variability in all ecosystems, with emphasis on longleaf pine-wiregrass, sand pine-oak scrub, pine flatwoods, hardwood/cypress, oak hammock ecosystems and other imperiled specialized communities.

Goal 8. Conserve and protect important elements of diversity—such as endangered and threatened species habitat, declining natural communities, and uncommon biological, ecological, or geological sites.

Goal 9. Manage for habitat conditions to recover and sustain viable populations of all native species, with special emphasis on rare species.

Goal 10. Apply prescribed burning technology as a primary tool for restoring fire's historic role in ecosystems.

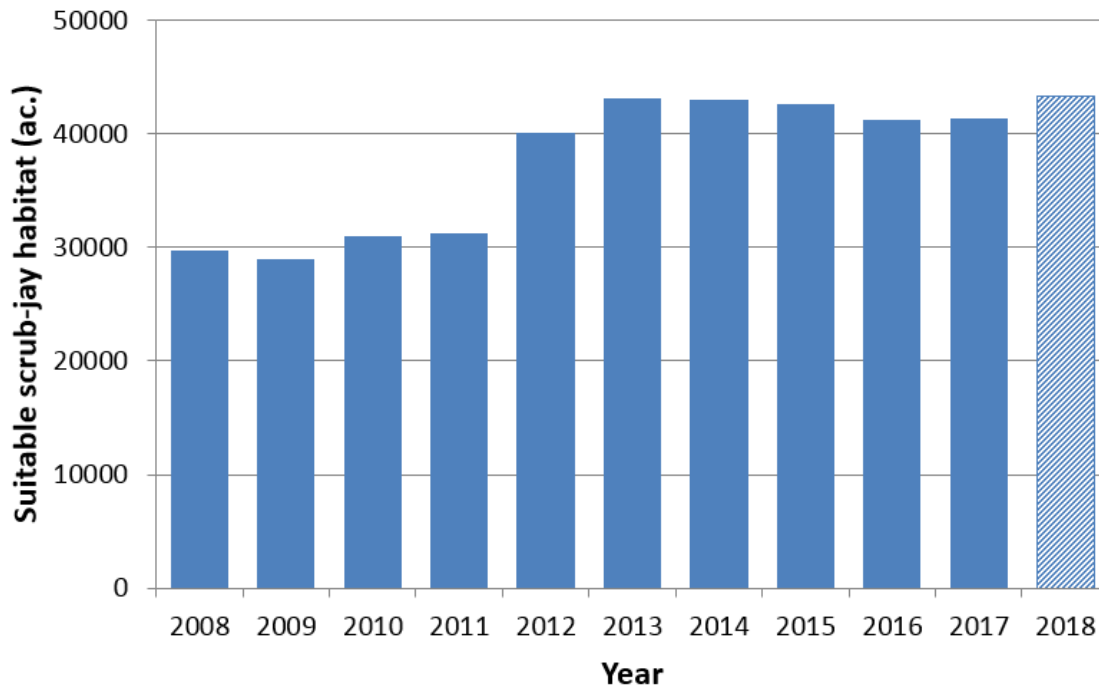
Objective 9. Maintain a dynamic system of at least 45,000 to 55,000 acres of habitat capable of supporting scrub-jays on the Ocala NF. The 10-year population objective is 742 to 907 groups.

Objective 19. Regenerate between 39,000 and 41,000 acres of sand pine on the Ocala NF.

The primary management tool used in scrub is commercial harvest of sand pine, which is a short-lived species that is generally economically valuable when stands are ~30-50yr old. After harvest, most stands are reforested with sand pine through natural regeneration or artificial seeding. Prescribed fire and roller-chopping are also commonly used as post-harvest site preparation or, less frequently, to maintain open oak scrub habitat conditions.

Harvesting sand pine supports the local economy and harvested stands provide habitat for many species that prefer open scrub conditions, including several rare, threatened or endangered species that occur only in Florida scrub. Creating large areas of early

successional habitat suitable for Florida scrub-jays, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, has been one of the primary considerations when planning and implementing scrub management. The chart below shows the area of suitable Florida scrub-jay habitat (3-12 years after sand pine harvest, fire or chopping) on the Ocala National Forest, including projections based on already approved and implemented activities. Additional sand pine harvest or other activities that create open scrub conditions will be required to achieve the 45,000-55,000 acres of suitable scrub-jay habitat in Objective 9 above.



### Purpose and description of the proposed action

The North 40 Scrub Management project will contribute to the forest plan goals and objectives listed above, will contribute to the local timber economy, is consistent with the US Fish and Wildlife Service's current effort to revise the Florida scrub-jay recovery plan and would contribute to adding scrub-jay habitat if a current forest plan amendment is also approved. Additionally, management activities proposed in some stands will reduce hazardous fuels near private inholdings or properties bordering the forest.

The project area encompasses about 60,000 acres in the north central portion of the Ocala National Forest and is located within 31 compartments: 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 55, 56, 58, 59, 66, 67, 68, 74, 97, 101, 105, and 106 (see Map 1 below).

The proposed action includes the following:

- 7,168 ac. of commercially harvesting mature sand pine stands (29-85yr old), followed by chopping then seeding to regenerate sand pine.
- 1,323 ac. of chopping and seeding sand pine in areas with low tree density

- (mostly young stands with insufficient regeneration for future timber harvest).
- 2,212 ac. of commercially harvesting sand pine then managing as scrub oak (i.e., post-harvest chopping and/or prescribed fire but no sand pine seeding). These stands are either currently in areas designated for scrub-jay management (MA 8.4) or in areas proposed for this management through a current forest plan amendment (documentation available at <http://goo.gl/1Ze7Xg>).
  - 228 ac. of chopping and burning to perpetuate oak scrub stands. These stands are either currently in areas designated for scrub-jay management (MA 8.4) or in areas proposed for this management through a current forest plan amendment.
  - Restoring longleaf pine and native groundcover to ~60 acres within the OHV Administrative Site (formerly a sand pine seed orchard for genetically improved stock).
  - Additional activities would include opening areas for crooked wood harvest and the road reconstruction and maintenance required to access the stands proposed for management

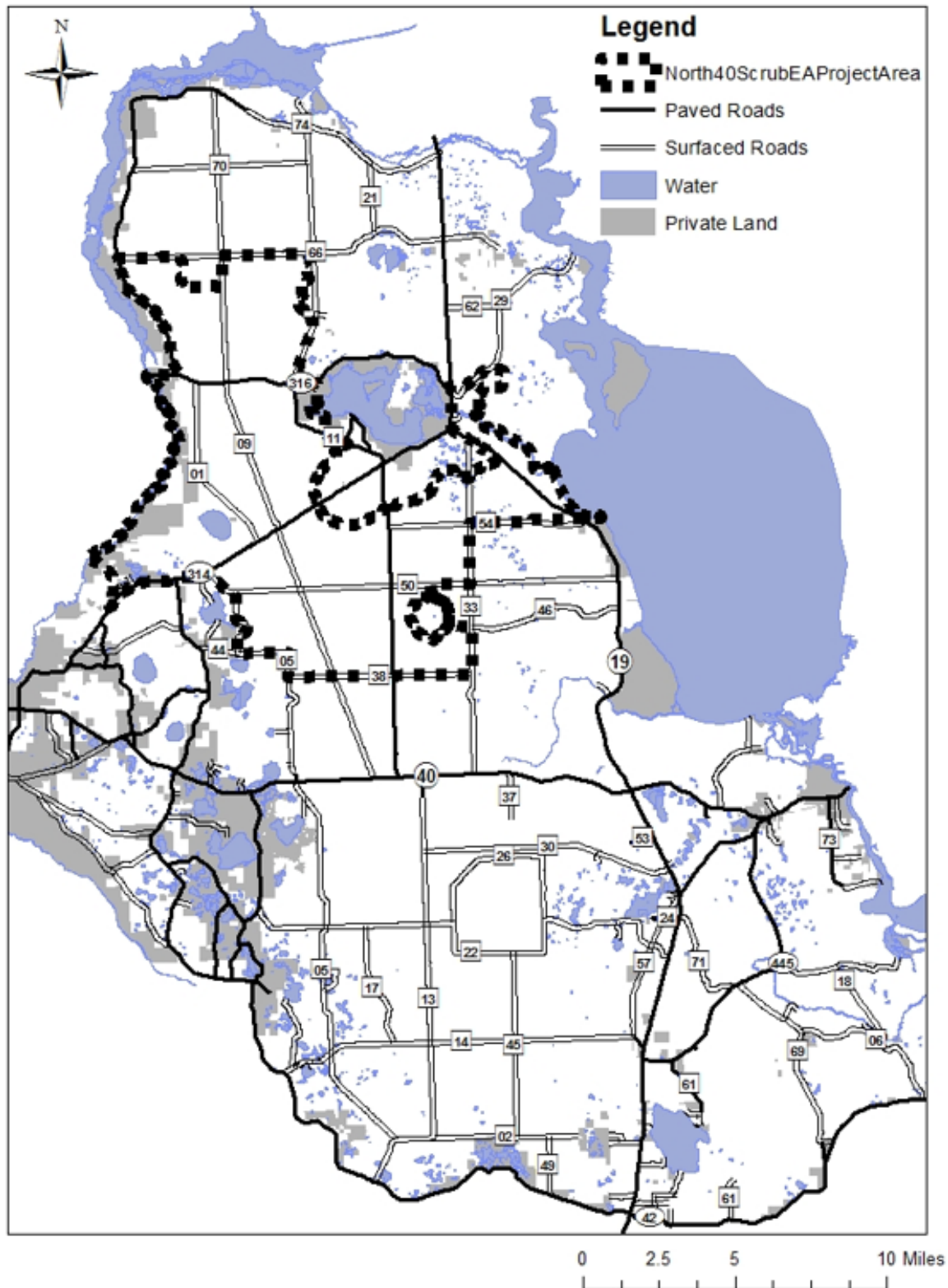
The locations of these activities are shown in Map 2 below. Cumulatively, these actions would create about 11,000 acres of habitat for the Florida scrub-jay through timber sales, mechanical treatments, and prescribed burning. The total estimated volume of sand pine proposed for harvest is approximately 87,000ccf. Implementation of this project would comply with all applicable Forest Plan standards and guidelines, as well as any design features and monitoring requirements developed by the interdisciplinary team. Implementation would begin in 2017 and continue for 4-8 years.

### **Project status and public involvement**

The Ocala National Forest has developed this proposed action based on management direction in the forest plan, consideration of available scientific information related to forest resources and discussions with state and other federal agencies. The forest has extensive experience managing scrub habitat and none of the activities proposed in this project are unprecedented, although the emphasis on scrub-jay habitat creation is greater than in past projects. Based on the scope of this project, we expect that the environmental effects will be documented in an environmental assessment (EA). This project will include at least three opportunities for public involvement:

- An initial scoping period to determine public interest, identify potential resource issues or concerns and consider alternative actions suggested by commenters
- A 30-day notice and comment period during which the public and other organizations and agencies may comment on the analysis in the draft EA
- An objection period during which individuals who provided previous comments may object to the draft decision

All of these opportunities will be announced on the project website and in letters or emails to the forest contact list. The latter two opportunities will also be announced with legal notices in the Ocala Star Banner.

**Map 1. Ocala National Forest and North 40 Scrub Management Project area.**

**Map 2. Proposed activities**